# New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1950

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*Theatre Openings*
"Great To Be Alive!"

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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# "Great To Be Alive!"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
March 24, 1950

= By HOWARD BARNES =

***Some Blithe Moments***

A TRICKY musical comedy idea has had uneven treatment in "Great To Be Alive!" For much of the time, the new Winter Garden show generates humor, fantasy and swirling movement as a clan of spirits haunting an old Pennsylvania mansion resists mortal intrusion. Since a live descendant, who has sold the spook house to a rich New York divorcee, is able to see and talk to them, there are some of the entrancing qualities of Noel Coward's "Blithe Spirit" in the production. Stuart Erwin, Vivienne Segal, Valerie Bettis, Martha Wright and Bambi Linn are fine as some of the chief performers and the settings and costumes by Stewart Chaney are extraordinarily stylish and effective. But the introduction of a conventional romance and a whodunit keeps throwing the work out of key.

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The blithe moments of the Vinton Freedley offering are those in which the incorporeal beings cut capers. Walter Bullock and Sylvia Regan have created them with great imagination, from a Colonial dame, to a girl betrothed to a union soldier killed in the Battle of Gettysburg. Unfortunately the book becomes both attenuated and confusing, while Mary Hunter's staging of it is on the patchwork side. Abraham Ellstein's music is lively and generally suited to the problems of this musical comedy conceit and Bullock's lyrics are better than his jokes. In what must have been major revisions during the try-out, the dances and musical numbers by Helen Tamiris outweigh the story. Some of them are excellent.

There is too little of Erwin in "Great To Be Alive!" As the shy botanist who sells his ancestral home in order that a pair of Civil War lovers can be married after eighty-seven years, he is captivating. When he and a great-great-great-great-grandaunt are quarreling over the removal of cobwebs from the mansion, or he is seeking aid from his dead forbears an amusing eerie atmosphere pervades the Winter Garden stage. When he is being accused of three murders he is less at ease in the proceedings. Miss Bettis is superb as the ghostly matriarch who has more than one way of chasing away mortals. She sings and dances with equal authority, particularly in "Dreams Ago," a number which recounts her violent death in Colonial times with a brilliant dance accompaniment.

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Miss Segal is properly brash and as versatile as ever in the part of the intruding Mrs. Butterfield. In "That's a Man Every Time" or "You Appeal to Me," she is completely beguiling and her courting of the botanist is comical. Miss Linn, as the love-lorn apparition who hopes to take part in an earthly wedding gives a good account of herself; Miss Wright is excellent as the bride-to-be and Mark Dawson and Rod Alexander are fine as a live and a dead suitor. Among Miss Tamiris's dances is a macabre routine in which Mrs. Butterfield is haunted and among the better songs not already mentioned are "Call It Love" and "Who Done It." "Great To Be Alive" has a certain exuberance and originality, but it keeps going off at tedious tangents. Chaney's decor is the superior item of the musical comedy.

**"GREAT TO BE ALIVE"**

**Musical comedy with book by Walter Bullock and Sylvia Regan; music by Abraham Ellstein; lyrics by Mr. Bullock; staged by Mary Hunter; dances and musical numbers staged by Helen Tamiris; settings and costumes by Stewart Chaney; orchestrations by Robert Russell Bennett and Donald J. Walker; musical direction by Max Meth; presented by Vinton Freedley in association with Anderson Lawler and Russell Markert at the Winter Garden Theatre, March 23, 1950. The cast:**

| | |
|---|---|
| Bonnie | Bambi Linn |
| Prudence | Betty Low |
| Albert | Rod Alexander |
| Jake | J. C. McCord |
| Maybelle | Aleen Buchanan |
| Kitty | Valerie Bettis |
| Crumleigh | Jay Marshall |
| Butch | Earl Oxford |
| Leslie Butterfield | Vivienne Segal |
| Carol | Martha Wright |
| Vince | Mark Dawson |
| Woodrow Twigg | Stuart Erwin |
| Mimsey | Marjorie Peterson |
| Sandra | Virginia Curtis |
| Freddie | Russell Nype |
| Blodgett | Lulu Bates |
| Jonathan | David Nillo |
| The Minister | Ken Carroll |
| O'Brien | Don Kennedy |
| Rafferty | Paul Reed |

New York World-Telegram and The Sun
March 24, 1950

# 'Great To Be Alive' Has Lively Way With Ghosts

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

With its new tenant, "Great To Be Alive," the Winter Garden finds itself doubly haunted.

The musical tells about a contest between the new owners of an ancient mansion, and its ghosts. And frequently the telling of this story awakens methods not used on musical comedies for many seasons.

**Nothing to Worry About.**

If it is nostalgic, it is also sometimes obvious and slow. But it is bright and beautiful to watch, and certainly it stirs up not a worry in the world.

The gimmick here to freshen up contention between the living and the dead, is that the latter are visible and audible only to virgins. When you hear that Stuart Erwin starts out on intimate terms with his long gone ancestors, and that he is pursued by the alluring Vivienne Segal, you may well guess what his final difficulty is.

**Plans Wedding.**

Because of his concern for a young ghost couple who missed their wedding when the boy was killed in the Civil War, Erwin as the house's present owner, is determined to stage a wedding for the youthful ghosts.

He sells it to the much married Mrs. Butterfield (or Miss Segal, if you prefer, and we do) whose niece is about to be wed.

**Ghosts Find Killer.**

Actually not much tangible happens until a series of murders takes place and Erwin is accused. The ghosts discover the criminal, but will only tell the truth if Erwin gets all the living out of the house, and restores each cobweb to its former happy hanging grounds.

The most vivid excitement of the evening is provided by Valerie Bettis in a first act ballet, which she performs as the greatest grandmother of all the ghosts. She starts out to lure a few phantoms for herself, and sets the audience to howling like wolves. This sequence is nowhere as spectacular as her numbers in "Inside U. S. A.," but in it she has such glamour as has not been seen on stage or screen since the days of girls like Barbara LaMarr or Pola Negri, who devoted their lives to it.

**Inactive at Start.**

Vivienne Segal, who is likely to be any and everybody's favorite in musicals, is oddly inactive for the first act. She makes up for this in some measure by sporting a series of dashing gowns. Then in the second act she sings two consecutive numbers, and with the second, "You Appeal to Me," finally comes into her own.

Erwin is his familiar ingratiating self, gawky, shy and pleasant to have around. Martha Wright and Mark Dawson are clean cut and ready with the vocals as the members of the live wedding, while Bambi Linn and Rod Alexander are touching and graceful of toe as the young ghosts who will never get to marry.

**Play It Straight.**

There are elements in the show which quite innocently play straight the sort of thing burlesqued in the "Gladiola Girl" number in "Lend An Ear."

Three times in the first act, and a couple of times in the second, the juveniles are left alone on stage, come to grips, and let fly with a love dove ballad. One suspects that even Miss Wright and Mr. Dawson might think this somewhat frequent.

**Has Sporty Touch.**

One scene begins with all the living chorus marching in in bright colored sports clothes, to drop golf bags and tennis rackets while they grab cocktails. It is like "Follow Thru" or "Treasure Girl" all over again, just as the duets are like a modern dress "Student Prince."

This is not intended as complaint, but to be honestly informative. We found this nostalgia relaxing, though drawn out. Of the evening, the most vital recollections are the stately sets which rejuvenate themselves before your eyes, and the Bettis electricity.

**The New York Times**

March 24, 1950

## 'Great to Be Alive!' Opens at the Winter Garden—Vivienne Segal, Stuart Erwin Top Cast

Although it is entirely orthodox for ghosts to have a chilling effect on the things and people they haunt, it is not entirely practical for them to be doing that where a musical comedy is concerned. Yet that is just what they are doing to "Great to Be Alive!," which was presented at the Winter Garden last night.

Undoubtedly, Walter Bullock and Sylvia Regan thought they had gotten hold of a fascinating idea when they decided to write a musical book in which a family of ghosts tussle with some invading mortals for possession of an ancient mansion. Unfortunately, the idea is more attractive than the product. For these ghosts are not particularly whimsical, nor do they set up the kind of situations which might have been hilarious. In fact, they get matters so involved that what is being unraveled is a mixture of fantasy and farce, plus a whodunit that left at least one member of the audience not at all certain as to just what Mr. Bullock and Miss Regan really were trying to accomplish.

As you may already have gathered, this is a rather complicated book for a musical comedy. The ghosts don't at all like the idea that their home has been bought by living members of the human race. But since there is going to be a wedding, it's a good opportunity for two of their members to take the nuptial vows, too, the pair having been separated by the prospective bridegroom's getting killed in the Civil War. But then somebody shoots the minister, stone dead—yes, it happened last night—and, from there on in, there are the detectives, an oracular bat and some other paraphernalia to behold.

Not all the blame, however, should be heaped upon the witless ghosts. The humor is for the most part witless, too. And Abraham Ellstein's undistinguished score is not helped much by Mr. Bullock's lyrics.

Under these circumstances and Mary Hunter's direction, the cast works hard and willingly if none too successfully. Vivienne Segal, back on Broadway after a long absence, is an oft-divorced lady with the sophistication of her set, and she does all right. Stuart Erwin, on from movieland, is the comedian.

Handicapped by his material, Mr. Erwin it is clear, could be really funny, given the chance. Valerie Bettis, the dancer, talks in this one, as well as performing her chosen art. As the chief ghost, she is handsome and graceful and at the end of the first act gets a chance to show off a romantic bit of choregraphy by Helen Tamiris. Others toiling earnestly are Mark Dawson, Martha Wright, Bambi Linn and Rod Alexander.

Stewart Chaney is credited with the triple assignment of the sets, costumes and lighting and his contribution is an asset. But since the authors have mixed up their intentions, at moments, reminding you of "Berkeley Square," "The Enchanted" and "Heaven on Earth," their "Great to Be Alive!" has a rather debilitating effect. You feel with Miss Segal when she remarks toward the end of the evening, "There must be a logical explanation for all this."

L. F.

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**Daily Mirror**

March 24, 1950

## 'Great to Be Alive!' Has Enjoyable Moments

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Vinton Freedley, Anderson Lawler and Russell Markert brought a big, handsome, nostalgic and old-fashioned musical comedy, called "Great to Be Alive!", to the Winter Garden last evening. The producers have given it the benefits of a superlative production by Stewart Chaney and a first-rate cast, but they aren't quite enough to overcome book and score troubles.

Librettists Walter Bullock and Sylvia Regan have revived the haunted house theme. A wealthy New Yorker buys an old mansion and has it done over as a wedding present for her favorite niece. Before the marriage is performed, a few more have been added to the ranks of the ghosts inhabiting the house. In the end, the ghosts aid in unmasking the killer, and regain the place for themselves.

The story is told in patchworky sequences and with a modicum of genuine humor. The idea has good possibilities, but they haven't been satisfactorily developed. The music by Abraham Ellstein is tuneful, undistinguished and reminiscent.

Vivienne Segal, a really great trouper, and Stuart Erwin are excellent as the purchaser and seller of the haunted premises. So excellent, in fact, that they merited better material. Valerie Bettis is a standout as a graceful, sophisticated and beautifully stylized ghost.

Pretty Martha Wright and handsome Mark Dawson do justice to the worldly love interest, while Bambi Linn and Rod Alexander do likewise by a ghostly romance.

Mary Hunter's direction seems dated. She has both ghosts and living principals dwelling in a creaky world of musical-comedy cliches. The dances by Helen Tamiris are good, particularly when Miss Bettis holds the stage.

The settings and costumes by Chaney should make him a candidate for one of the season's prizes. Oh yes, and conductor Max Meth rates a bow for his dynamic batoneering.

"Great To Be Alive!" has some highly enjoyable moments, thanks to the fine talent Freedley and associates have assembled, but hardly sufficient for these demanding days.

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**DAILY NEWS**

March 24, 1950

# Spooks, Fun and Grand Dancing in New Musical, 'Great to Be Alive'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

A very Broadway, very Hollywood audience at the Winter Garden had a good time last evening at the premiere of Vinton Freedley's musical, "Great to Be Alive." And so did I, most of the time, thanks to an amusing plot about a haunted house, the dancing of Valerie Bettis, Stewart Chaney's lovely sets and costumes, the wry humor of Vivienne Segal and the amiable, stumblebum qualities of Stuart Erwin.

In fact, the whole company is handsome and pleasant, with Mark Dawson and Martha Wright as Boy and Girl and Bambi Linn and Rod Alexander as their ghostly counterparts. And Lulu Bates gets in some hot work as a blues-singing cook.

The book, by Walter Bullock and Sylvia Regan, has Mr. Erwin selling his ancestral Pennsylvania home—a derelict dump—to the wealthy Miss Segal. Miss Segal has it fixed up for the wedding of her niece, Miss Wright. Mr. Erwin has sold the place so that a couple of his late relatives, who have been in love 87 years, can sneak in on the Dawson-Wright ceremony and get wed, too.

**One Long Joke.**

"Great to Be Alive" depends essentially upon one joke and it is a two-hour gag. It is planted in the beginning and the snapper is obvious immediately—yet the snapper doesn't come until a moment before the end. It is, simply, this: The ghosts of this ancient mansion can be seen and heard only by persons who are, in the cynical eyes of music-show writers, pure. Not even the beautiful heroine who is in love with the beautiful hero can see these wraiths, for she is a young widow.

The only ones at the Winter Garden who can see the long-dead mob are Mr. Erwin and Marjorie Peterson. Except, of course, the audience. I saw them plain as anything and so did others, including movie actresses. Oh, well, it's up to the authors to explain themselves out of this jam.

The ghosts are an attractive crew headed by the remarkable Miss Bettis, who is a curiously effective actress as well as being a remarkable dancer. Her first-act